Poe, "The House of Usher," and the American Gothic

Dennis R. Perry and
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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-0-230-6126-7
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First published in 2009 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States – a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-37901-9 ISBN 978-0-230-62082-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230620827

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Macmillan Publishing Solutions

First edition: May 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

This book grows out of two problems in Edgar Allan Poe studies, especially those concerned with his relationship to other writers, both writers of nongenre fiction and those in Gothic and supernatural horror writing. First, in terms of his influence on other writers, such influence studies as those by Lois Vines and Burton Pollin are important as far as they go, but they mostly overlook his influence on Gothic and horror writers (though Pollin does discuss Poe's influence on Stephen King). Whether this is because they wish to associate Poe with mainstream writers, or aren't familiar with those genres is not clear. Second, on the other side of the literary spectrum, the problem is that Poe so ranges across stylistic boundaries that he can be easily marginalized in studies of genres in which he should be acknowledged as a key player. For example, because Noël Carroll classifies Poe as a Gothic, rather than horror, writer, he leaves him out of his *Philosophy of Horror.*

Poe's influence is so enormous that one is hard-pressed to know just where to begin to account for it. In its broadest aspect, this study is meant to demonstrate Poe's impact on a number of genres that, in part, still exist in the form they do because of his enormous influence. These genres include psychological horror ("The Yellow Wallpaper"), ghost stories *(Turn of the Screw)*, weird tales ("Shadow over Innsmouth"), haunted house stories (*Haunting of Hill House* and *The Shining*), graphic slasher stories (*Psycho*), and urban horror stories (*Rosemary's Baby*). We attempt to solve these problems by (1) addressing his relationship to other writers of Gothic and supernatural horror and defining Poe broadly enough so as to include him in more of the literary conversation; and (2) limiting our scope to the influence of one story, his masterpiece, "The Fall of the House of Usher."

We explore "Usher's" influence by viewing its relationship to other texts as a kind of conversation. That is, Poe's descendents,

looking back at "Usher" as a model of certain effective characteristics of storytelling, enter into a dialogue with Poe's tale. While retaining certain touchstones of "Usher," writers explore new ways of developing these elements. These elements include the presence of an outsider who has a mysterious affinity with a house, often a repressed woman, and the unfolding of a process of psychological decay toward an apocalyptic conclusion. The result is that Poe speaks back. He does so by opening up in the presence of new ideas, yielding new perspectives on his tale in the light of what ideas in "Usher" were modified. Depending on the subject matter of the story being analyzed, we facilitate these literary conversations between texts with a pluralistic methodology that includes feminism, psychoanalytic and myth criticisms, and other theoretical approaches.

Acknowledgments

This project has benefited from the support of many institutions, colleagues, and friends. First, we would like to express thanks for the continued encouragement and support of the English Department and the Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature at Brigham Young University. The College of Humanities at Brigham Young University has generously offered financial and collegial support throughout this process. We also thank the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming for opening up the Robert Bloch archive to us. Some portions of Chapter 5 originally appeared in "What Screams are Made of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H. P. Lovecraft's 'Pickman's Model,'" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 16.4 (2006): 335–49. We thank the editors for their kindness. Debbie Harrison read the entire manuscript through and provided invaluable and expert editorial comments.

Dennis: I am ever grateful for the loving support of Mary Lyn, Rich, Lindsey, Emily, Chris, Michael, Katie, Becky, Kirk, and Eric, whose patience with me whether I'm writing a book or not is always appreciated.

Carl: I would like to thank my wife and son for their love and kindness. I also thank my extended families for their love and support. I gratefully acknowledge my several colleagues and friends in the Gothic, Horror, and Stephen King sections of the Popular Culture Association conference, especially Tony, Mary, and Phil.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The "Usher" Formula

There isn't anywhere you can go in this overcast, weedgrown, blood-fertilized field of ours that [Poe] hasn't been first: the chilly blue-lit corners, the arena of onstage violence, Poet's Corner, the comedy sideshow, the Vale of Things Man Was Not Meant to Know. In the perfumed mouldy halls of horror, he is the doorkeeper, the cartographer, and the resident ghost.

—John M. Ford

Real art is news that stays news.

—Ezra Pound

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is widely recognized as a literary masterwork and has been regularly included in short story, Gothic, horror, and American literature anthologies. Why Poe's dark story of madness, premature burial, and a sentient house is so important may be partially answered in the aggregate of the hundreds of critical articles and chapters that seek to explore its seemingly endless ambiguities. As Clive Bloom summarizes the problem, Poe's tale "is probably the most interpreted short story ever written, its ambiguities endlessly fascinating" (3). To summarize the body of such criticism would be an impossible task, even for an introduction to a book about its significance. Even to account with any comprehensiveness for

the various theoretical and interpretive "camps" that have grown around the tale is beyond our scope and purpose. However, we hope to provide briefly something of the flavor of various key approaches to "Usher" in order to contextualize what we attempt in this study.[1]

In "The House of Poe," Richard Wilbur famously represents one important critical perspective on "Usher," exploring the notion that Poe's fictional output may largely be understood as a comprehensive, "deliberate and often brilliant allegory" (255) of the "poetic soul to escape all consciousness of the world in dream" (260). As Wilbur explains, "the scenes and situations of Poe's tales are always concrete representations of states of mind" (260). Turning to "Usher," Wilbur argues that "The House of Usher is, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher, and its dim interior is, in fact, Roderick Usher's visionary mind" (264). Considered as a state of mind, then, Roderick Usher becomes "an allegorical figure representing the hypnagogic state" (265). Daniel Hoffman likewise examines Poe as a writer who explores large and complex metaphors of the self in his fiction. Writing about "Usher," Hoffman points out that the house itself "is no house at all, but a profound and intricate metaphor of the self" (297). As in Wilbur, we see here the desire to read Poe in terms of grand gestures, moves that help us grasp his larger psychological implications rather than his twists and turns of plot. Hoffman goes on to explain that even the narrator's place in the story involves a "journey into the darkest, most hidden regions of himself" (297). Put another way by Eric Savoy, "of all nineteenth-century American writers, Poe seems most thoroughly our contemporary in his attempt to give language and a narrative structure to what Freud came to describe as the unconscious" (181).

Whereas critics such as Wilbur and Hoffman speak of Poe's interest in allegorizing the mind and the self, other critics, including Joseph Riddel and Gregory Jay, interpret "Usher" in terms of what it may tell us about the powers and limitations of language. Riddel writes that throughout "Usher," Poe helps us understand that the story is really about a change in the natural order of things, a change that forces us to consider the "failure of language" (891). Instead of seeing allegories of the mind, Riddel's argument considers "Usher" as a tale about the constant repetition of language's failure to signify any permanent meaning.

He writes that "everything in 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is a metaphorical detour, a delay in the course of a narrative that pushes toward its own tautological conclusion" (895). Discussions of "The Fall of the House of Usher" are not easy to classify under any one particular head. Many of the widely recognized approaches strive to make sense of the story in terms of large-scale commitments to various intellectual, theoretical, and social themes ranging from aesthetics to psychology to feminism. John Grusser recently formulated his sense of these differing approaches by stating that most criticism falls under two sets of opposing perspectives—those dealing with either "rationalism versus supernaturalism" or "reliability versus unreliability" (80). Although we do not wish to rehash the different sides in debates over "Usher," we find Grusser's comment to be a helpful means of labeling the broad terms through which scholars discuss the tale generally. What these approaches share is a desire to read stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher" in terms of a grand narrative, whether found in coming to a greater aesthetic sensibility or understanding the difficult connections between our world and our minds.

Responding to this diverse body of criticism, G. R. Thompson warned against trying to read "Usher" only in terms of a singular thematic approach. He explains that "it is misleading to conceive of the meaning of the tale as devolving solely upon any single and fixed subject, such as the supernatural character of the house, or of Madeline Usher, *as opposed* to a Gothic homily on the neurasthenia of the ultimate in narcissistic artist heroes, or as opposed to the incestuous guilt and hereditary curse of the family" (88). For Thompson, the story's main significance is that it "is a concatenation of all these, and not an either/or question" (88). Although there are thousands of pages that attempt to make sense of "Usher" in terms of one or another rather large purpose, Thompson's 1973 claim strikes us as still relevant. Finding a stable meaning within "Usher" will always be futile. After all, some of the more recent sophisticated critiques of the story, including deconstructive approaches, rely on the idea that the story not only refuses to be read but also helps us see language in terms of what it can't do.

In this project, we must turn slightly away from the surveys of literature that would normally help make up a book on a tale like "Usher." While critics will continue to explore and exhaust the kinds of debates surrounding "Usher," our interest lies in

making sense out of the ways other American Gothic horror writers have read Poe's greatest short story over the years and how they have transformed their readings into important works of their own. Our approach to "Usher," then, is fairly simple. We wish to explore the influence of "The Fall of the House of Usher" on prominent modern Gothic and supernatural horror texts, an influence that has gone too long overlooked. To this end, we treat these modern fictions as not only readings of but also significant critical responses to "Usher." In so doing, we take a critical cue from George Steiner's claim that "all serious art, music and literature is a *critical* act" (11). Our project therefore is concerned less with resolving the ongoing debates over "Usher's" critical meaning but more with tracking the ways stories by other writers within the Gothic horror tradition open up ways for us to understand what makes that tale so significant and powerful.

I

There have been several books addressing the titanic length and breadth of Poe's shadow over world culture, a shadow touching everyone from Dostoyevsky to Debussy, Baudelaire to Wilkie Collins, and Melville to Ray Bradbury. His contributions have been enormous, including his articulation of a still important theory of tightly structured narratives, his invention of detective fiction, his pioneering contributions to science fiction, and his anticipation of modernism's concern with the psychology of deterioration. Although Poe's influence is broadly recognized, there remains a surprising lack of detailed discussion of his influence on writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Shirley Jackson, Stephen King, and others who recognized his centrality to the genre and his continuing relevance. An important purpose of this project is to account specifically for the overlooked significance of "The Fall of the House of Usher," one of the primary foundational texts of modern horror, haunted house, and ghost stories. Such an oversight misses a rich opportunity to explore Poe's embeddedness in much of contemporary psychological and supernatural fiction. On the one hand, Poe's presence in horrific supernatural literature and films is so pervasive that it would be nearly impossible to document; on the other, the peculiar importance of this story itself cries out for an extensive study of its potential influence and impact.

Because of its pervasive influence, "Usher" lends itself particularly well to an intertextual study. It is a well-known critical commonplace about fiction these days that "authors have always been aware of relationships between the work they were writing and other texts" (Cancalon and Spacagna 1). Indeed, as Julia Kristeva notes, "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (qtd. in Cancalon 2). Moreover, Michel Foucault adds forcefully that "no book can exist by itself . . . it is a spot in a network" (qtd. in Cancalon 2). Although we agree that all texts work within and against each other, we prefer Anna Nardo's formulation in her comparative study of George Eliot and John Milton, that relationships between authors of related texts may be described as a kind of intellectual wrestling match or, as she calls it, a "strenuous dialogue" (1). For this study it is just such a relationship between later horror writers and Poe's "Usher" that we intend to explore.

To be more specific, however, we want to discuss the conversation about Poe's greatest work, "The Fall of the House of Usher," as the turning point in Gothic literature in which Poe includes most of the basic rules of the game of horror writing. Here he establishes the psychological relationship between character and place in a dreamlike atmosphere that builds, both in terms of the diagesis and the narrative structure, toward an explosive climax of collapse and destruction. To this framework Poe adds doublings, inexplicability, dream logic, primitive mental states, madness, and so forth. To help us frame this conversation between Poe and his "children" (Magistrale and Poger 9), we reference Kristeva's concept of texts having two intertextual dimensions: (1) the vertical, or the orientation of one text toward other texts, and (2) the horizontal, which is focused more specifically on the writing subject and its addressee (Cancalon 13). We wish to interpret Kristeva's split focus on the text in a way that accounts for the two dimensions of a writer's strenuous dialogue with Poe. Vertically speaking, "Usher" becomes the subtext of current American Gothic horror works, becoming the framework they flesh out, including the basic "Usher" situation of an outsider coming to a strange house/setting and being absorbed by it. Horizontally speaking, the writer is trying to outdo Poe, seeking new, presumably more relevant ways of applying "Usher's" kaleidoscope of horrific possibilities. For example, vertically, *The Shining* is about Jack Torrance's being absorbed by the Overlook Hotel just like

"Usher's" narrator into the House of Usher itself; horizontally, King adds complications of telepathy, a detailed history of Jack's failures, and imagery such as the creeping boiler, the clock, and the living topiary. King uses Poe as a platform from which to stage new thrills and dimensions of blue-collar Gothic horror. Thus, *The Shining* incorporates Poe's inexplicabilities, doubles, dream life, and madness into King's ongoing exploration of more modern dysfunctional families, father-son relationships, and innovative horrific effects.

While Poe's importance has been long recognized, "Usher's" influence on subsequent Gothic horror and other supernatural tales has been only sporadically developed. Indeed, many important critical statements on Poe focus on his significance as a Gothic writer within the American literary tradition. Leslie Fiedler, for example, demonstrates that Poe literally haunts American literature by symbolizing the deep conflict between the play of fear and desire that lies at the heart of the American experience. Poe's work, Fiedler suggests, provides a glimpse into the dark nightmares of the American psyche, his obsessions creating "a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face" (27). Fiedler is therefore able to call Poe "the eternal prototype of the American writer," because he exists in our imagination as the representative of our darkest nightmares (425). More to the point, Mark Edmundson claims that American culture is deeply divided between the Gothic nightmare and the American Dream, as epitomized by the works of Emerson and Poe. As he puts it, "Ours is the culture that produced both 'Self-Reliance' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'" (5). Some more recent studies build on Fiedler and Edmundson by showing some of the depth Poe's influence has had on American literature. Dale Bailey's *American Nightmares,* for example, connects Poe to the larger haunted house tradition. Finally, Tony Magistrale and Sidney Poger's study *Poe's Children* underscores Poe's major influence on recent detective fiction. These two studies represent the kind of focused work on Poe's influence that helps define the purpose of our own project.

If we return to "Usher's" own importance, we note that several critics have commented on its role as a pathbreaking work of fiction. In *Gothic Horror* (1998), Bloom suggests that "Usher" not only marks "a decisive break between the Gothic of *Otranto* and

the later psychological horror of the late nineteenth century but it also marks the appearance of a self-conscious aestheticism allied to, but different from, the popular tale of horror" (3). Combining physical and psychological horror, Poe created in "Usher" a space for "old-style" Gothic as atmosphere wherein the "mind isolated with itself" can be explored. Dani Cavallaro, in *The Gothic Vision* (2002), builds on Bloom's assessment: "Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' [1839] can be said to have generated a matrix for the exploration and portrayal of haunting situations as locations inseparable from their inhabitants' mental states" (87). However, neither Bloom nor Cavallaro builds on these insights, apparently assuming that detailed exploration and analysis of "Usher's" influence is unnecessary. Terry Heller's *The Delights of Terror* (1987) points out the irresolvable tension between natural and supernatural readings of the tale, a tension that is heightened rather than resolved as the tale unfolds (127). The inability of literary critics to bring closure to "Usher" reflects its haunting indeterminacy. Narratively and textually, "Usher" continues to haunt writers of Gothic and supernatural horror.

In this introduction we will review Poe's presence in scholarly studies of horror, terror, and the Gothic and examine the literary ancestry of Poe's "Usher," which includes the Gothic tradition in general, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Das Majorat" (1817), Samuel Warren's "Thunder-Struck" (1835), Heinrich Clauren's *The Robber's Castle* (1812), and Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), as well as mentioning other more minor literary and biographical sources. We next define the attributes of the "Usher formula" itself, the key elements of Poe's tale that most characterize it and most often appear in later stories: the psychologically tainted outsider who energizes the spectral residue in a mysterious house, the presence of the inexplicable, the violence, the doubling, the psychological disintegration, and the atmosphere of dread centered around the inability to locate solid cognitive ground. Finally, we tie these various aspects of the "Usher formula" together through the concepts of spectrality, the fantastic, and the uncanny, all of which highlight the indistinguishable boundaries between the psychological and the supernatural, the aliveness and deadness (presence/absence) of the formula itself, and the spectral nature of literary texts through which Poe haunts his literary descendents.

II

Poe's "Usher," first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in September 1839, is the culmination of the Gothic literary tradition from 1764 (when Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otronto: A Gothic Story* was published) to the sensational short fiction of Poe's own day.[2] Walpole's short novel, together with those of Ann Radcliffe and others, establishes a narrative tradition characterized by gloomy settings centered around an ancestral house or castle complete with subterranean chambers. The activities within this dreary setting create an atmosphere of mystery, decay, and terror. More often than not there is a female victim enclosed within the castle who is threatened sexually and otherwise by a mysterious antagonist and "supernatural" happenings. In addition, these narratives are extravagant in their dark melodrama, relying on a sublime imagination, the unreality of romance, and exaggerated emotions and dialogue. Often the plots are convoluted, while the endings are happy and tidy. These stories cover a wide range of iterations: those outrageous in their supernaturalism (*Otronto*), those syrupy in their sentimentality (Radcliffe's *The Italian*), or those near pornographic in their sexual obsessions (Lewis's *The Monk*). As a result, since its inception, the Gothic form has proven to be infinitely flexible and adaptable to later literary purposes, from the social, moral, and realistic Gothic novels of Victorian England (Dickens and the Brontës) and the Gothic novels of the twentieth century and beyond (Faulkner, Morrison, and Oates) to the horror stories of Lovecraft, Straub, and King. For "Usher," Poe certainly draws on the Gothic tradition, highlighting a gloomy and decaying house and setting, mysterious events, supernatural hints, an ambiguous protagonist, a suffering female, and an atmosphere of terror. But, of course, he doesn't stop there.

One important Gothic fantasy source for "Usher" Alterton notes is E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Das Majorat" (translated as "The Entail"), which features a decaying ancestral castle in a wild and remote area, uncanny scratchings, a beautiful but nervous woman, and an antisocial inhabitant of the castle named Roderick. In addition, the house arguably functions as a symbol for the ancient family who has possessed it for generations. Unlike Poe's tale, however, "Das Majorat" is narrated in a light, fairy-tale tone much of the time: the ruined house is literally falling apart, humor and

nonsense are pervasive, the house is haunted, there is a lot of dialogue, hunting parties demonstrate a continuous social life, and there are mundane details about area politics and estate business. The narrative concerns the decline of a wealthy old family mired in ancient transgressions. The current patriarch, Roderick, entails the family property, leading to conflict between his sons. In the end, the family implodes just as the castle tower collapses. Poe seems certainly to have been aware of "Das Majorat" as it is discussed by Sir Walter Scott in *Foreign Quarterly Review* (1827) and was available in various translations. While Hoffmann's story contributed little to "Usher's" tone or narrative economy, other elements seem too similar to ignore.

Alterton, who first suggested the above Hoffmann influence, also pointed out Warren's "Thunder-Struck" from *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* (1835), a title Poe himself mentions in "How to Write a Blackwoods Article" (1838). Warren's anecdote, presented as autobiographical, has for its setting a tremendous thunderstorm, which, because of a beautiful patient's fear of an impending apocalypse, causes her to become cataleptic. The bulk of the story concerns Warren's attempts to bring her around with everything from hot compresses to galvanic shock therapy. She finally revives on her own, covered in blood from her nostrils. Though she seems to be getting better, she sends for her fiancé, whom she warns to "prepare" for his death. She dies soon thereafter, followed by him several months later. While the storm and the beautiful cataleptic remind one of "Usher," more interesting are other Poe-esque suggestions in the story, about the dangers of a too-early interment ("The Premature Burial") and the possibility of a being able to hear all that is happening, yet being unable to respond physically ("The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"). Probably the most Usher-esque moment in the piece is when the doctor first comes upon the cataleptic, described as a terrifying woman with arms outstretched.

Another possible source for "Usher" is Clauren's *The Robber's Castle* (1812), translated by John Hardman as *The Robber's Tower* for the December 1828 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Told in first person, the tale concerns a young man who visits his aunt in her remote castle at the death of his female cousin. She has been placed in the cellar, just below where the narrator sleeps. When the narrator can't sleep during a storm, he begins reading

a curious book on rituals when he hears noise of iron clanging below him. Ultimately the dead cousin appears. The tale furthers anticipates "Usher" in using story elements, which include stringed instruments, the twin of the dead cousin, and the reflections of the castle in a lake.

Other sources have been noted for the tale's atmosphere, its famous opening sentence, and the characters Roderick and Madeleine. Lodwick Hartley, for example, wonders if the life of Lawrence Sterne's eccentric friend, John Hall-Stevenson, who lived in the Usher-esque Skelton Castle, might have contributed to the atmosphere of Poe's story. Washington Irving's opening sentence in his piece "Westminster Abbey" from *The Sketch-Book* (1820) suggests a similar autumnal mood to "Usher's" opener: "On one of those sober and rather melancholy days, in the latter part of Autumn, when the shadows of morning and evening almost mingle together, and throw a gloom over the decline of the year, I passed several hours in rambling about Westminster Abbey" (894). Certainly the words "evening," "melancholy," and "Autumn" correlate with Poe's sentence, and given Irving's importance in the 1830s, it is unlikely that Poe's effective elaboration of this passage is merely coincidental. The suggested true-life source for Roderick and Madeleine Usher are James Campbell and Agnes Pye Usher, who were the orphaned children of Poe's mother's stage friends. James and Agnes were, in fact, known to have been neurotics in a kind of psychological doubling.[3]

Not mentioned as an "Usher" source elsewhere is *Edgar Huntly* (1799) by Brown, an early American Gothic writer whom Poe admired. The main lines of similarity include the first-person narration with its emphasis on recording detailed sensations of terror and disbelief; the narrator, Edgar Huntly himself, coming across a highly strung character named Clithero who is oppressed with a mysterious grief and a cursed past; the setting of Norwalk, a wild and dangerous rocky area of Pennsylvania that is both gloomy and remote and seems to have a psychological effect on the characters; an idealized female at the center of the story who at one point seems to be dead but isn't; and Clithero's death by sinking into water. While several of these details seem generally Gothic as well as peculiarly linked to "Usher," the number of them is provocative. The most convincing connections are the psychological doublings in the story. First, the link between Edgar and

Clithero is reinforced by the narrator's sympathetic obsession and reenactments of Clithero's actions: he follows him step for step to and from Norwalk, takes on Clithero's malady of sleep walking, similarly kills in self-defense, and ends up with the girl originally chosen for Clithero. Second, the doubling of Clithero and Edgar is echoed in the link between Mrs. Lorimer and her brother (á la Roderick and Madeline), in which she feels she will die if he does. Thus, the pattern of doubling may be the most significant foreshadowing of Poe's tale.

III

Our project contributes both to the ongoing recent discussion of the aesthetics and cultural significance of Gothic literature and its branches: terror, horror, romance, and the weird tale. Other recent studies have focused on either the aesthetic or cultural work of the genre, often narrowing their generic scope to horror or Gothic tales in a way that misses Poe's influence. In Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), for example, Poe is not central because he is labeled as a writer of terror—the category in which Terry Heller's *The Delights of Terror* (1987) places him. While Heller's reader-response examination of terror prominently features Poe's "Usher" and "Ligeia," Poe is not explicitly made central to the history of the terror tale. Louis Gross's *Redefining the American Gothic* (1989) places Poe in a Gothic tradition, but not as a central figure. In fact, Gross offers the controversial argument that Brown may even be more central to American Gothicism than Poe, a claim with which our study obviously takes issue. Similarly, Teresa Goddu's *Gothic America* (1997) views Poe as a Gothicist, though her discussion locks him in a Southern American literary tradition without reference to his ongoing influence. Poe is placed more centrally in Bloom's *Gothic Horror* (1998), tracing modern horror through Poe's important innovations to the Gothic, combining physical and psychological approaches. In fact, he centers his discussion of Poe around "Usher" (3). Following his introduction, however, Bloom spends the rest of the book diverging into the various opinions of various writers on horror, not following up on his own "Usher" thesis. In a sense, this study elaborates Bloom's hint and provides the missing individual analyses of texts in light of "Usher" that demonstrates its influence.

Reading the opening pages of Cavallaro's *The Gothic Vision* (2002), in which he quotes and agrees with Bloom's assessment of "Usher's" importance, one would suspect that our study might be unnecessary. However, Cavallaro goes on to use Poe's "matrix for the exploration and portrayal of haunting situations" in "Usher" not to focus on aesthetic concerns as much as to ground his readings of Gothic texts as "cultural discourse" and "ideological speculation" (vii). In *American Nightmares* (1999), Dale Bailey locates Poe at the genesis of a distinctive genre, one that Poe developed through "Usher." However, Bailey only begins to develop how Poe's tale functions as a significant influence in the progress of American horror writing since then.

Unlike many of its predecessors, our study doesn't wish to engage in parsing genre distinctions, asserting that Poe generally, and "The Fall of the House of Usher" specifically, looms so large over all modern variants of Gothic and horror literature that labeling Poe as of one or another genre tends to minimize his vital contributions to most Gothic-born genres. Poe is arguably the one indispensable figure in American Gothic, horror, terror, and weird fiction. A central aim of this book is to recenter Poe and to explore his enduring significance to American horror, particularly through the lens of "Usher."

Poe, like many writers, is a synthesizer of what came before him, remaking his sources to fit his own literary agenda, combining his sources, together with the Gothic tradition itself, to create a tale that has become an archetype in the collective literary consciousness. The essence of Poe's achievement is that he radically alters his sources, stripping them bare of all he considered extraneous to his chosen effect, carefully molding what was left into truly new and original material. From his general Gothic sources he removes the usual plentitude of characters, simplifies the plot to build toward one climactic event, eliminates cultural, national, moral, historical, or political contexts, and virtually invents Gothic minimalism. From Hoffmann's "Das Majorat" Poe guts the rambling plot line, the light narrative tone and nonsense humor (which he saves for other kinds of stories), extra characters, ghosts, and the love story. From Warren's narrative Poe eliminates the exaggerated emotional sensibility characteristic of the age, dialogue, and fluctuations in tone. In their place Poe gives us a tale that is more tightly wrought, infusing Gothic art with a more modern sensibility that plumbs